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Myth and Religion Study Guide

For GCSE OCR Classical Civilisation

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Gods

Learning Objectives:

- To identify the 14 main gods and both their Greek and Roman names
- To understand their responsibilities and symbols
- To understand how they are typically represented in Ancient Greek and Roman art



Introduction

Religion in the ancient world of Greece and Rome was polytheistic, meaning that people believed in many gods. Each god would have a specific role, and different gods would be important to different people, depending on what their own role was in life. The gods resided on Mount Olympus in Greece, according to both Greek and Roman tradition. There was a god for virtually everything; the pantheon of gods in both Greece and Rome was very large. However, there were some that were the best known and most important; these will be covered in this chapter.

Characteristics of the Gods

The gods of the Greek and Roman worlds were greatly different from the god of the Christians and other **monotheistic** religions. While they were immortal, none of the gods were meant to be omnipresent or omnipotent, as the Christian God is meant to be. That is why there were many gods with different roles. If people wanted to accomplish something, they would pray to the god who was responsible for that activity. Also, Greek and Roman gods were not considered to be all good like the Christian God. They were thought to exhibit similar emotions to humans, meaning that they could become angry or jealous. A displeased god was a dangerous god, meaning that you would want to make sure that they had no reason to be angry with you!

immortal – someone who cannot be killed. All the Roman gods were immortal.

polytheistic – describes a religion with many gods

pantheon – a collection of all the gods of any one religion

monotheistic – describes a religion with just one god

syncretism – the merging of different religions, cultures or philosophies

Relation between Greek and Roman Gods

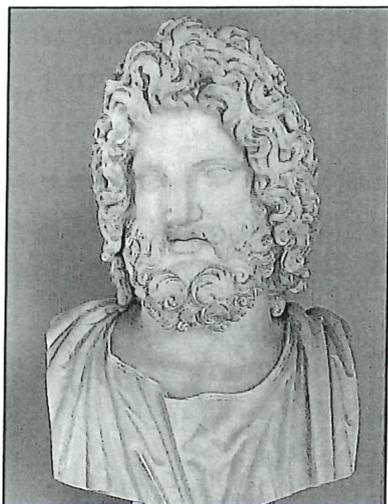
Roman and Greek gods are in many ways two sides of the same coin. Greek culture was established and very influential when Rome was still in its infancy. Over time, as the Romans encountered the Greek world more and more, they began to equate some of their gods with the Greek ones that appeared similar, though maintaining their own names for them. The myths and attributes associated with the Greek gods became associated with the Roman gods that were seen as essentially the same. In some cases, Greek gods were entirely adopted into the Roman pantheon. The relative importance of the gods and their attributes sometimes remained different, however. Ultimately, while there are many similarities between the two sets of gods, it was on the whole a matter of syncretism rather than adoption, but as time went on many began to equate the two sets more and more as being the same gods, just with different names.



Painting showing the main gods of the Graeco-Roman pantheon.

Note that this is a later artist's impression provided for illustrative purposes and to support understanding. In your exam, you will be looking at primary Greek and Roman sources only.

The Gods



Name: Zeus (Greek), Jupiter (Roman)

Role(s): King of the Gods, God of the Sky, God of Law

Associated symbols: Eagle, Lightning Bolts

Brief description: Zeus or Jupiter was the king of the gods, as well as the father of many of the gods. Therefore, he was the most important deity in both Ancient Greece and Rome. As such, he was usually depicted on a throne. He was the most powerful of the gods, and as a lawgiver would try to impose his will on the rest of the pantheon, with varying degrees of success. He was known to be promiscuous, having a habit of coming to earth and having many children with mortal women. This was in spite of being married to **Hera/Juno**. The Romans considered Jupiter as the protector of their city and people. Eagles were thought to be the messengers of Zeus/Jupiter, which is why their appearance was seen as a good omen, particularly for the Romans.

Name: Poseidon (Greek), Neptune (Roman)

Role(s): God of the Sea, God of Earthquakes, God of Horses

Associated symbols: Trident, Horse, Dolphin

Brief description: Poseidon/Neptune was the god of the sea and brother to Zeus/Jupiter and Hades/Pluto. The story goes that the world was divided between the three brothers. Zeus/Jupiter took for himself the sky and land, while Poseidon/Neptune received the sea. As god of the sea, he was very important to sailors, who would pray to him for a safe voyage. In addition, it was he who would be thanked for naval victories. Storms at sea were considered to be a sign of Poseidon's/Neptune's displeasure. As trading via the sea was much faster than over land, and, therefore, more significant, he was a very important god. This was especially true for the Romans, considering the fact that their empire spanned the whole Mediterranean Sea. Poseidon/Neptune would often be depicted with a trident, which was his most common symbol. He could use it to generate earthquakes.



Name: Hades (Greek), Pluto (Roman)

Role(s): God of the Underworld

Associated symbols: Cerberus, Pomegranate, Helmet/Cap of Invisibility

Brief description: Hades/Pluto was the god of the underworld and the brother of Zeus/Jupiter and Poseidon/Neptune. In the division of the world, he was granted rule of the underworld. This was the least attractive of the three realms but was still important as it gave him control over all the mortals who had gone before, as all those who died went to his underworld. Cerberus was a creature that was most often associated with him. Cerberus was a three-headed dog that guarded the entrance to the underworld. Hades/Pluto was also the judge of the dead. He was also associated with great wealth as he owned all the gold and silver in the ground. He was apparently a God of many names, and the Romans also knew him as Dis Pater and Orcus, though the latter was more often used to describe him as a punisher of evildoers, as well as being used as a name for the underworld itself.



Name: Hera (Greek), Juno (Roman)

Role(s): Queen of the Gods, Goddess of Marriage and Family

Associated symbols: Peacock

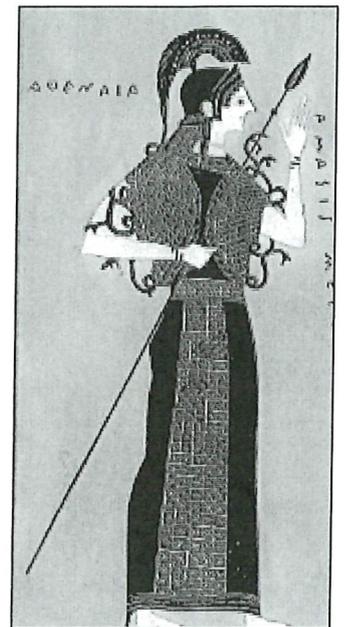
Brief description: Hera/Juno was the Queen of the Gods and wife to Zeus/Jupiter. She was also his sister. As the chief goddess of the pantheon she was also the protector of women. She was known to attempt to get revenge on Zeus/Jupiter's many lovers and their children. The most famous example of this was the case of Heracles/Hercules, who was the most famous of Zeus/Jupiter's mortal children. Her jealousy resulted in her making his life hard, and she was responsible for his having to undertake the famous 12 Labours. Hera/Juno was known for a wide variety of functions, as well as her most famous ones of marriage and family, such as looking after the Roman treasury.

Name: Athena (Greek), Minerva (Roman)

Role(s): Goddess of Wisdom, Goddess of Arts and Crafts

Associated symbols: Owl, Helmet and Shield, Olive Tree

Brief description: Athena/Minerva was the daughter of Zeus/Jupiter. Her birth was quite unique in that she was born from his head. The story goes that Zeus/Jupiter impregnated another immortal, but after recalling a prophecy that a child of his would overthrow him, he swallowed her whole. After this, he began to have a terrible headache and asked for his head to be cracked open in order to find out why it hurt. This would not kill him for he was immortal. The result was that Athena/Minerva came out, fully clothed and in battle armour. Her role as goddess of wisdom, of arts and crafts, and of warfare and strategy (hence her usual appearance in full battle gear) meant that she had many important roles and was significant to many aspects of society.



Name: Ares (Greek), Mars (Roman)

Role(s): God of War

Associated symbols: Dog, Wild Boar, Vulture

Brief description: Ares/Mars was the god of war and the son of Zeus/Jupiter and Hera/Juno. He was also the lover of Aphrodite/Venus. He is often depicted in full battle armor to symbolise his role. Mars was particularly important for the Romans not just because of their proud military tradition, but also for his role in the foundation myth of Rome. He was the father of Romulus and Remus, the legendary founders of the city of Rome, and so is the reason the Romans called themselves 'Sons of Mars'. He would often be prayed to before a battle and be given thanks to after a victory. The Campus Martius was named after him; these were fields just outside the city of Rome where the military trained and where they gathered before a new campaign. The month of March is named after him, probably because it was in the spring that new campaigns would start. However, for the Greeks, Ares was far less important and far less worshipped. He often represented the brutality and devastation of war.



Name: Apollo

Role(s): God of Prophecy, God of Light, God of Music

Associated symbols: Lyre, Sun, Mice, Laurel Tree

Brief description: Apollo was the twin brother of **Artemis/Diana** and the son of **Zeus/Jupiter**. He was portrayed as an eternal youth, beautiful but also just and wise. Often, he was associated with justice and morality. Apollo was one of the main gods of the Roman pantheon who came entirely from Greek influence; there was no Roman equivalent that he was compared to; and the only one where even the name was unchanged. Much of his importance in religion and myth is his role as the origin of the famous Oracle of Delphi. An oracle was a method of contacting the gods and determining what their wishes were or a way of divining the future. Famously, the oracle always replied in a very vague manner that could be interpreted in many ways. Often, it was misinterpreted, but it was always proven to have been correct.

Name: Aphrodite (Greek), Venus (Roman)

Role(s): Goddess of Love, Goddess of Fertility

Associated symbols: Dove, Swan, Roses

Brief description: Aphrodite/Venus is unique in her relation, or rather lack of relation, to the other gods. She was born out of sea foam and came to represent the balancing of the opposites of males and females in life. She was married to **Hephaistos/Vulcan**, but as he was ugly and lame he did not appeal to her. Instead, she had affairs with **Ares/Mars**. Venus was particularly important to the Romans as she was the mother of Aeneas, the legendary ancestor of the Roman people. As a result, prominent Romans such as Julius Caesar and Augustus claimed descent from her. As the goddess of love and the embodiment of sexuality and female charm, she was often associated with great beauty and would be depicted at least partly nude. This is also why girls would give offerings to her at key stages of their life; when girls came of age they would offer their toys to Venus; they would also make an offering to Venus just before their wedding. For the Greeks, Aphrodite was better known as representing lust and passion.



Name: Hephaistos (Greek), Vulcan (Roman)

Role(s): God of Fire, God of Blacksmiths

Associated symbols: Hammer, Quail, Fire

Brief description: Hephaistos/Vulcan was the god of fire and the son of **Zeus/Jupiter** and **Hera/Juno**, and, therefore, the brother of **Ares/Mars**. He was also the husband of **Aphrodite/Venus**. He was a master blacksmith and was often portrayed as one, being able to forge the best arms and armour. His ability was so great that he even made the thunderbolts that **Zeus/Jupiter** hurled from the sky. His association with fire meant that people prayed to him to avert destructive fires. This is why the Roman festival dedicated to him, the Vulcanalia, was celebrated in August, when the summer heat threatened the crops and granaries the most. He was born ugly, which resulted in **Hera/Juno** throwing him from Mount Olympus (the home of the gods). When he landed, he injured one of his legs and would remain lame as a result. Eventually, he would develop a talent as a blacksmith and be granted **Aphrodite/Venus** as his wife.



Name: Hermes (Greek), Mercury (Roman)

Role(s): Messenger God, Divine Herald, God of Travellers, God of Money

Associated symbols: Crane, Caduceus (the staff he is holding), Winged Helmet and Sandals

Brief description: Hermes/Mercury was the son of Zeus/Jupiter from one of his many extramarital affairs. His primary role was as the messenger of the gods; in this capacity he would pass messages between gods or from the gods (especially Zeus/Jupiter) to mortals; though this was initially at least a role more associated with Hermes than Mercury. To aid him in this, he was equipped with a winged helmet and winged sandals, objects that make him easily identifiable in statues and other artwork. Interestingly, Mercury appears to have been the most popular

and, therefore, the most worshipped god in Roman times. This is indicated by the fact that he appears the most in household shrines in Pompeii, the best preserved Roman town. This could be due to another role of his, that of god of money. Another important role of his was escorting souls to the underworld.

Name: Artemis (Greek), Diana (Roman)

Role(s): Goddess of the Hunt, Goddess of the Moon, Goddess of Childbirth

Associated symbols: Moon, Silver Bow and Arrows, Deer

Brief description: Artemis/Diana was the daughter of Zeus/Jupiter from one of his many extramarital affairs. One of her main roles was as goddess of the hunt, and she was associated with woodland and wild animals; this also meant that she was seen as the ruler of the countryside. She was also known as the virgin goddess of childbirth. This meant that her appeal was to a wide section of society. Women seeking to become pregnant would pray to her. Those already pregnant would pray to her for an easy delivery. Another of her roles was as the patroness and protector of the plebeians / lower-class citizens and slaves, the latter of whom were able to seek refuge in temples dedicated to Aphrodite/Diana.



Name: Hestia (Greek), Vesta (Roman)

Role(s): Goddess of the Hearth, Goddess of the Home

Associated symbols: Fireplace, Ass

Brief description: Hestia/Vesta was a sister of Zeus/Jupiter. She is the goddess of the hearth, home and family. She was considered a virgin and was often depicted as a stern woman. Originally worshipped only in homes, she eventually became important at a state level. Her importance in Rome is indicated by the presence of the Vestal Virgins, a group of young Roman girls who dedicated themselves to the goddess. The fact that this was Rome's only group of full-time priests indicates the importance of Vesta. Their primary role was to keep a sacred flame that was in the main Temple of Vesta in Rome burning eternally. Interestingly, this temple was round and covered with a dome in order to protect the flame, a unique design for Roman temples. This fire was

considered the hearth of Rome itself and so gave Vesta a role as a protector of the Roman family. Another unique feature of her temples is that none of them had a statue to her inside.



Name: Demeter (Greek), Ceres (Roman)

Role(s): Goddess of Harvest and Agriculture

Associated symbols: Grain, Flowers, Fruit

Brief description: Demeter/Ceres was the sister of Zeus/Jupiter. She was often depicted as a fully clothed mature woman holding the fruits of harvest. As the Goddess of Harvest and Agriculture, she looked after the fertility of the earth and was often associated with the cycle of life and death. She was also the mother of grain. As a result she was often prayed to for a good harvest. One of the most famous stories surrounding her was the abduction of her daughter Persephone/Proserpina by Hades/Pluto. This resulted in her daughter having to live half her life with him in the underworld. This is the reason for the seasons, as autumn and winter occur

when Demeter/Ceres is sad due to the absence of her daughter. This story was also used to explain the growth cycles of vegetation. As well as her agricultural role, she was also known as the bringer of laws, with this association stemming from the notion that agricultural society was the most civilised.

Name: Dionysos (Greek), Bacchus (Roman)

Role(s): God of Wine and Winemaking, God of Theatre

Associated symbols: Thyrsus (a staff of fennel covered with vines and topped with a pine cone), Grapevine, Masks

Brief description: Dionysos/Bacchus was another of Zeus/Jupiter's sons. He was often depicted as either an effeminate youth with long hair, or with a beard, but it is easiest to identify him as he will have something to do with wine, either grapes or vine leaves, on his person, perhaps as a wreath. He was often also depicted as a foreigner, and as one who travelled widely. He was known for the frenzy he inspired in his followers where they would become freed from fear. His festival, the Dionysia in Greek and Bacchanalia in Roman, was when such actions would occur. Wine was not just seen as a gift from him, but as an incarnation of him, with the focus being on the joy and the easing of suffering that wine could bring. Performance art was also central to Dionysos/Bacchus, and his festivals are seen as the early inspiration for the birth of theatre. He is one of the main gods that was entirely adopted into the Roman pantheon from the Greek, with the Romans simply Latinising one of his epithets into Bacchus, the name that evoked his role as inspiring frenzy.



The Gods in Ancient Sources

The gods were a central part of Ancient Greek and Roman culture, and as such featured heavily in their art, architecture and literature. The ways that they were depicted show us the importance that the ancients gave to their gods, as well as telling us of the attributes and responsibilities of the gods through the stories that they told.

The Temple of Zeus at Olympia

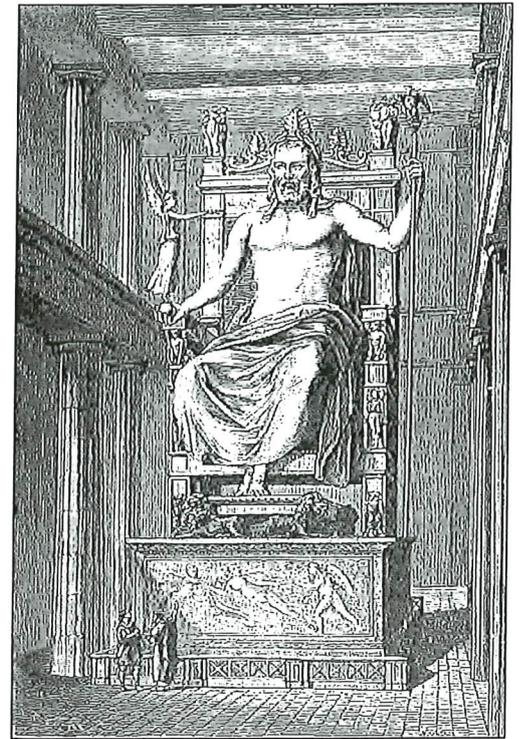
The small city of Olympia in Greece was home to the grand Temple of Zeus which housed the Statue of Zeus, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World according to several ancient authors. The very fact that it was designated as such shows the importance to the Greeks not only of religion, but also of Zeus



Fifth-century BC Greek coin depicting the Statue of Zeus.

specifically. The statue sadly hasn't survived to this day, and we only have descriptions and representations of it on coins with which to imagine what it had looked like.

In the illustration on the right, Zeus cut an imposing picture, dominating the space and towering over you as you entered the temple. Seated on an ornate throne, as he was often depicted, illustrated his role as King of the Gods. In one hand, he is holding his sceptre surmounted by an eagle, a symbol of his authority. The Roman use of the eagle as a symbol of power derives from its association with Zeus/Jupiter. Roman armies would march behind a standard bearer who would carry a staff likewise topped by an eagle. In his other hand, Zeus is holding the Greek goddess of victory, Nike. This goddess was often depicted close to Zeus and this association shows how worship of Zeus would have been deemed important for those seeking victory. It is in this regard also that the Roman use of the eagle standard should be considered.



Nineteenth-century artist's impression of the Statue of Zeus at Olympia.

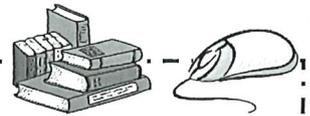
Note that this is a later artist's impression provided for illustrative purposes and to support understanding. In your exam you will be looking at primary Greek and Roman sources only.

The Homeric Hymn to Demeter

Homer is somewhat of an enigma. It is not entirely certain whether he was one man or a group. Many works of the ancient world that described popular myths and legends were attributed to him.

The *Homeric Hymns* were one such set of works. The *Hymn to Demeter* gives us a good picture of several gods by the language used. It was very typical to not merely mention the gods by name, but to include an epithet, an adjective or a phrase referring to a specific attribute. A good example is in line 3: 'far-seeing Zeus, the loud-thunderer'. Here in fact there are two epithets; they reference both his association with lightning ('loud-thunderer') and his divine sight, a reference to either his role relating to justice or more generally as god of the sky – seated in Olympus he has the ability to see much further than most. The same epithets would not always be used as sometimes different roles of the gods would be referenced. Later in the hymn, there is reference to 'Zeus the Father' (line 368), evoking his role as father of many of the gods as well as heroes, but also as a reverential title given his position as King of the Gods.

Many of the other gods are also referenced in his hymn along with their epithets. In line 31, there is a reference to Hades as 'Ruler of Many, Host of Many', which refers to his position as King of the Underworld, which means he has dominion over all the dead. Line 54 refers to 'Revered Demeter, bringer of the seasons'. Demeter's association with the seasons is illustrated clearly here. The way that these roles are mentioned along with the god's name has a lot to do with the way that these hymns would have been delivered – orally rather than in written form – and these epithets served as aids for the one delivering the hymn, allowing them to remember the next part. But they also entrench the idea of certain roles and attributes of the various gods that these epithets are assigned to, as each god or goddess would often have a few that were very recognisable as belonging to him or her.



Independent Research

There are many other myths associated with the gods covered on the previous pages. Pick one or two of the gods and research some other stories about them, focusing on what this shows about the responsibilities and attributes of each god or goddess.

Here are some ideas of stories that you could explore:

1. Zeus/Jupiter and Leda
2. Poseidon/Neptune and the walls of Troy
3. Aphrodite/Venus, Hera/Juno and Athena/Minerva and the judgement of Paris
4. Artemis/Diana and Actaeon
5. Dionysos/Bacchus and the invention of wine

Consolidation Questions

- a) Look at the picture of the Statue of Zeus on the previous page. Which role of this god is best depicted, and how?
- b) Which god or goddess was associated with (i) prophecy, (ii) war, (iii) wisdom?
- c) Give an example of a god or goddess whose role or personality differed between the Greek and Roman versions.
- d) Explain why Poseidon/Neptune was very important to both the Greeks and the Romans.

Source Questions

Classical source-based units include **unseen sources**. These are sources you are not expected to have seen before as they are not on the prescribed list. However, you will be expected to discuss them using the skills you have.

- 1) Look at the source below.



Now answer the question below:

Identify the three gods depicted and explain how you know who they are.

- 2) Read the source below.

*Six couches were put out in public; one for **Jupiter and Juno**, another for Neptune and Minerva, a third for **Mars and Venus**, a fourth for **Apollo and Diana**, a fifth for **Vulcan and Vesta**, and the sixth for Mercury and Ceres.*

Livy, Ad Urbe Condita, 22.10.9

Why were the gods in bold paired in this way?